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Chapter 4

Architects of *Playtime*: Cities as social media in the work of Jacques Tati

Lisa Landrum

Introduction

It has become commonplace to consider cities as heavily mediated environments, where mediated is taken to imply an intervening realm of digital imagery and information, influencing the way we perceive and interact with all things and all people, most everywhere and all the time. The expression 'mass media' – popularized by Marshall McLuhan to designate the whole gamut of electronic and environmental devices through which, like it or not, 'everybody becomes involved' (McLuhan 1964: 349) – is still apt for describing the pervasive reach of digital mediation in the twenty-first century. But does 'digital' best describe the kind of mediation fundamental to cities? Digital mediation may be increasingly omnipresent, but is this of primary importance when considering configurations of urban settings for human affairs? Might the pervasiveness of digital mediation, and the associated fragmentation of experience that McLuhan predicted, be obscuring other modes of mediation that have always been and may long remain fundamental to viable cities? In his book *Ambient Commons*, Malcolm McCullough approaches such questions. Regarding media-saturated cities with equal fascination and concern, McCullough advocates balancing absorption in mediating technologies with quieter 'unmediated' perceptions (2013: 292-3). Yet, is there such a thing as 'unmediated' perception? Philosophers have long argued that there is no immediate, bare or direct perception, since human experience is always already mediated by intervening agencies, such as language, history, memory, social relations, situational contingencies, corporeal capacities, cultural presuppositions, and personal inquisitiveness. Pitting 'unmediated' against 'mediated' experience could, thus, hardly advance our understanding of urban phenomena involving myriad kinds and degrees of interaction.

This chapter argues for a fundamental shift in thinking about mediation, especially with respect to cities. The aim is to restore to mediation its most common senses, including social, situational and interpretive senses, which the act of mediating still entails in spite of present preoccupations with hi-tech media. One could approach this topic philologically, by attending to the roots of 'media'. Literary critic John Guillory has recently accomplished this by tracing 'the path by which this ancient word for 'middle' [*medius*] came to serve as the collective noun for our most advanced communication technologies' (2010: 321). Alternatively, one could interrogate built examples, unpacking, as David Leatherbarrow has done in *Uncommon Ground*, the 'mediating function of architectural edges' (2000: 198). This chapter, though informed by these studies, examines

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different evidence: namely, the mediating interplay of citizens and city as represented in Jacques Tati's 1967 film *Playtime*. Exemplary for its portrayal of human interactions with – and against – their fabricated milieu, *Playtime* is also relevant because its production commenced in the same year that Marshall McLuhan published *Understanding Media* (1964); which is to say, just when media and mediation were felt to pose problems for understanding. Although the mention of McLuhan is said to have drawn blank stares from the comedic mime turned film-maker (Rosenbaum 1995 [1983]: 165), theories of McLuhan do resonate with theatrics of Tati, since both expose tacit but meaningful reciprocities between people and environments. Previous architectural studies of Tati's *Playtime* have emphasized the film's comic critique of modernity, and its lead character's productive state of distraction.[1] This chapter focuses on the film's largely non-verbal exchanges, seeking to recover and reinterpret some of the most basic ways in which mediation manifests in cities.

Conceived as a satire of post-war urbanization, *Playtime* depicts the city of Paris bereft of distinctive historic architecture (save for fleeting reflections) and besieged by generic infrastructural and mechanical devices, including glass curtain-walls, modular partitions, escalators, elevators, automatic doors, turnstiles, air-conditioning systems, parking meters, public intercoms and personal televisions. These devices were incorporated into an extensive purpose-built set, dubbed Tativille, which ultimately (and infamously) bankrupted the director (Bellos 1999: 241-50). Together with these now normative mechanized urban elements, *Playtime* showcases more ridiculous devices intended to mock consumer fascination with novel gadgetry: battery-powered brooms with headlights; eyeglasses with hinged lenses (for applying mascara); and cigarette-dispensing table lamps. If Tati were making *Playtime* today, he would no doubt extend his satire to smartphones, Google-glasses, drones, airport security scanners, etc. However, *Playtime* not only satirizes mediating gadgetry, it also dramatizes – through meticulous choreography – other mediating agencies embodied in social situations and interpretive individuals. Although Tati's Paris appears radically transformed by innovative gadgets, it is these other embodied and interpretive modes of mediation that are more efficacious in bringing about restorative civic change. So, setting gadgets aside, the mediating agents to consider first are the film's human intermediaries.

Human intermediaries: Hulot as serendipitous architect and tacit guide

Playtime features a double storyline involving groups and individuals making their respective way through a foreign city with the help and hindrance of others. The film begins by following a group of American tourists as they arrive to Orly Airport and are then corralled – methodically – through an ultra-modern Paris on a one-day stopover during an organized tour of Europe. Alongside these tourists, *Playtime* follows an individual Frenchman, Monsieur Hulot (played by Jacques Tati), as he, too, arrives in Paris and

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Figure 1: Tour guides directing American tourists (left); Hulot leading audiences as he pursues Gifford (right). *Playtime* (1967), © Public Media Home Vision.

Figure 2: Pont Alexandre III, full screen (left); detail (centre); Left Bank pillars of Pont Alexandre III, © CNP Collection / Alamy Stock Photo, 2011.

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engages the city in a more socially entangled way. Whereas the tourists obediently follow a prescriptive itinerary, experiencing the city via the mediating directives of official guides, Hulot accepts directions from strangers and, more ambivalently, searches and drifts, taking filmic audiences along with him wherever he goes. Unlike the tourists, whose every move is efficiently managed while on their way to do nothing of particular importance, Hulot strives to meet Gifford, a busy executive, but a barrage of modern conveniences impede his pursuit. This double storyline – which culminates with all characters reveling in the same nightclub – introduces two distinct sets of intermediaries: tour guides, on the one hand; and Hulot, together with Hulot-like strangers, on the other. Whereas the tour guides operate more in the foreground, controlling mass movement and directing group attention to predetermined sights, enforcing a closed narrative; Hulot, and other

Hulot-like characters, act in the margins, diverting and dispersing attention in ways that open-up multiple associations and potentialities.

In one scene, these intermediaries converge to elucidate the city's layered history. In this scene, an American tourist points toward a generic office tower and mistakenly observes, 'From what the book says, that should be *le pont Alexandre trois* [the Bridge of Alexander the Third]. I'm sure it is!' Her confidence in the guidebook, in spite of what we recognize as an obvious incongruity, establishes the ironic humour of this scene. However, if we look askew, away from the misidentified office building and toward a whistle-blowing traffic cop (played by Tati), we discover in the background two ornamental pillars of the famous bridge completed for the opening of the 1900 World's Fair, easily identified by their allegorical sculptures of the taming of Pegasus. Although this monument to a previous century's technological aspirations may be accurately marked in the guidebook, in being almost completely obscured by the modern office tower (and unknown to the tourist), it is only recognized with the diverting assistance of a Hulot-like guide: a marginal intermediary whose mediating gestures – as framed by Tati – are more directive of interpretive attention than vehicular traffic.

Whereas the instrumental tactics of the film's tour guides derive from efficiency-driven attitudes of techno-bureaucratic society, the mediating agencies of Hulot stem from an anonymous architect whose peculiar gait and fallible behavior had greatly impressed Tati (Gilliatt 1973: 40).[2] This performative affinity between Tati, Hulot and architects is of central importance to *Playtime*, not only because Tati counted architects among his closest artistic collaborators and considered architecture the star of his film,[3] but also because a fallible architect character is featured in the culminating nightclub scene. In the Royal Garden restaurant, a nervous architect (with a roll of drawings under his arm) emerges from behind a curtain on opening night, just as the guests begin to arrive. While the nightclub fills with boisterous patrons and musicians, the situation gradually slips into chaos, as the club becomes afflicted by accumulating technical and design malfunctions, which the architect records in a punch list. Towards the end of this long scene, the title 'architect' is taken away from the ineffectual character and transferred to Hulot. The circumstances are both comical and revealing. Having intervened to help a woman obtain a golden apple lodged beyond her reach in an ornamental screen, Hulot inadvertently brings down the ceiling. His well-meaning gesture has the accidental effect of stripping away elitist pretentions cheaply built into the classy club, while alluding to mythopoetic narratives involving apples of discord and the demise of edenic gardens. More pertinent to *Playtime*, this unexpected transformation of décor initiates a corresponding transformation in decorum, gradually turning the formal club into a more informal bistro. Recognizing this liberating transformation, an elated tourist snatches the drawings away from the architect of the Royal Garden, saying, 'You're fired!' He then awards these drawings to Hulot, announcing 'He's the new architect'. This symbolic transfer recognizes Hulot as an alternative agent of architectural transformation, one who initiates a loosening of the rigid social order built into the club. While the official architect strives to bring the environment into conformity

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with his drawings, becoming increasingly frustrated with deviations and malfunctions, Hulot simply responds to basic existential desires of the people. Two further points must be made about Hulot's mediating actions as a serendipitous architect: he is completely caught up in the midst of situations, while remaining strangely aloof from them; and the circumstances in which he meddles are not of his own devising – he is wholly involved, to be sure, but the scope of transformation is beyond him.

Throughout *Playtime*, Hulot and a variety of Hulot-like intermediaries act alongside (and somewhat against) more officially sanctioned guides to palpably influence perceptions of situations in and beyond the film's narrative. But perceptions of the city, as a complex work of mediation, are also guided by Tati's carefully mediated approach to cinema.

Multi-mediation: Tati's polychronic approach to cinematic media

Tati used what were in the 1960s the most advanced technologies in cinematic media, including wide-screen formatting, colour-film processing, and surround sound. However, he used these new media in ways that, ironically, recovered and reinterpreted more basic and enduring modes of mediation.

Wide screen formatting: Broad awareness and focused attention

Tati shot *Playtime* with the newly available 70mm film, enabling a projected aspect ratio much wider than 35mm film had previously allowed. Audiences loved this new media for its immersive effects, since the wider screen enveloped viewers in expansive landscapes and exciting spectacles, like those featured in *The Sound of Music* (Wise, 1965) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962). Compared to these films, the wide scenes of *Playtime* appear empty and unremarkable, for Tati used the extra-ordinary breadth of frame to capture ordinary situations (like waiting in public spaces), and to heighten awareness of 'infra-ordinary' details latent in such situations.[4] As Tati himself explained in a 1964 interview, 'What I like in wide-screen film are not cavalcades, gunfights, crowd scenes and so on, what I find extraordinary is that the device allows the viewer to have a fuller appreciation of a mere pin dropping in a large empty room' (Bellos 1999: 259). In other words, Tati appropriated wide-screen formatting for attending to narrowly focused details within an expanded field of awareness, viewing peculiarities of phenomenal events and human practices against broader cultural milieus. This new media helped make inconspicuous aspects of everyday experience more legible by contrast and, so, more available for comic appreciation and critical interpretation.

Aside from using 70mm film to re-frame quotidian content, Tati explored this new medium's compositional possibilities. But instead of rapid jump cuts, daring camera movements, and dramatic close-ups, as explored by early film greats such as Sergei Eisenstein,

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Figure 3: An extraordinary cavalcade in *Lawrence of Arabia* (left); an infra-ordinary situation of waiting in *Playtime* (right). *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), © Columbia Trista. *Playtime* (1967), © Public Media Home Vision.

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Orson Welles and Carl Dreyer, Tati preferred fixed-position filming and long-shot tableaux. These basic formats enabled Tati to present actors fully – from head to toe – milling about their milieu on the screen much as they would appear to one another when moving about the city, or to an audience when performing on the stage of a theatre. Tati thus treated the wider screen as a generous window onto social reality, a kind of urban proscenium, which spectators could imaginatively reconstruct for themselves upon leaving the cinema. Tati's compositional strategy was also unique in that he did not cluster activity in the center of the screen, but instead distributed small events around the periphery. With so many simultaneous events happening in the margins and background, it is impossible to follow all that transpires in a single viewing. One must return for repeated viewings, or pause the film to scan the motionless screen (as we have the luxury of doing now). Such unhurried modes of visual inspection and retrospection are more appropriate to photography and painting. Indeed, Tati drew inspiration from photography, notably Robert Doisneau's 1962 composite photo-collage *La maison des locataires / A Home for Tenants* (Ede and Goudet 2002: 143). He also frequently compared himself to a painter, and 'quite consciously used the screen as if it were canvas, over which the eye could roam' (Bellos 1999: 261). Fruitful comparisons have been made between certain scenes of Tati and those of Raoul Dufy and Pieter Bruegel, whose paintings Tati may have encountered while apprenticing in his father's framing shop (Ede & Goudet 2002: 137-42). Such comparisons are helpful not simply because they posit the screen as canvas and film-maker as painter, but because they reveal the special way of seeing that Tati cultivated in his audiences. Spectators of *Playtime* were invited to become not thrill-seekers but patient observers, gradually discovering for themselves surprisingly layered and humorous associations in slowly disclosed but

Figure 4: Picture windows of Schneider's apartment building in *Playtime* (left); Robert Doisneau's *La Maison des Locataires/A Home for Tenants* (1962) (detail, right). *Playtime* (1967), © Public Media Home Vision.

Figure 5: *Playtime's* nightclub scene (left); Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *La Danse de la Mariée en plein air* (1566), Detroit Institute of Arts (right). *Playtime* (1967), © Public Media Home Vision.

eventful juxtapositions. As Tati remarked, my work 'demands an entirely different form of attention on the part of the spectator' (1968: 15). Though some moviegoers were baffled, bored and even resentful of *Playtime's* slow disclosures, Tati was convinced that their openness and prosaic multivalence activated the spectators' poetic and social imagination, allowing them to find and construct their own story.

Tati embraced wide-screen media in ways that negotiated older mediums, including painting, photography and stage performance, as well as the fundamental mediating agency of interpretive observation. What, then, is recovered and revealed through his use of colour film?

Colour film: Polychromatic meaning amid monochromatic tones

Early colour films, like *On the Town* (Donen and Kelly, 1949), were saturated with colour, showing-off what the new media could do with flamboyant costumes and décor. Such films have been characterized as 'medium-driven' (Bellos 1999: 111). *Playtime* takes a subtler approach. Though shot in Technicolor, *Playtime* appears nearly monochromatic, as if shot in black and white. Where colour is featured, it is used selectively to endow particular agents and aspects of the setting with heightened legibility and significance. For instance, most of the anonymous people in *Playtime* are clad, like their milieu, in varied tones of black, blue, and cool metallic grey. Against this uniform ground, Hulot sports warm grey, together with tan shoes and striped socks. The Hulot lookalikes typically wear overcoats of beige. The flustered architect is dressed in brown tweed. This close coordination of colour and pattern visually reinforces the interdependence of dress and décor, while subtly distinguishing the architect-like figures whose actions serve to adjust perceptions of that interdependence.

Aside from using colour medium in nuanced ways that build on prior understandings of tonal and textural contrast inherent to black and white film, Tati used colour symbolically to reveal narrative and allegorical meaning. Green, for instance, performs as a telling gauge of changing social atmospheres. Near the beginning of *Playtime*, isolated office workers appear lethargic, quarantined within pale green walls of identical office cubicles. Later, a stifling green neon light poisons the social dynamic in a drugstore, highlighting the sickly stance of customers and the unhealthy adjacency of food and pharmaceuticals. At narrative transitions in the film, dark green city buses rumble by, recalling the rhythmic pulses of a greater social body. In the nightclub scene, an emerald

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Figure 6: A stifling green light in the pharmacy (left); a delightful red glow at the exposition (right). *Playtime* (1967), © Public Media Home Vision.

green dress identifies Barbara, the only tourist who, like Hulot, regards her surroundings with curiosity. By her wine-drinking, piano-playing and modestly flirtatious behavior, Barbara – in her sparkling green dress – embodies a desirable and liberating kind of social interaction that is lacking in those pale green office cubicles. Finally, in a closing exchange, Hulot (somewhat smitten) offers Barbara – via a Hulot-like intermediary – a farewell gift wrapped in a similar sparkling green.

It is equally rewarding to observe Tati's selective use of red. At the start of *Playtime*, red is associated almost exclusively with flagrant emblems of the modern city: automobiles (an Avis car-rental sign); controlled movement (exit and no-entry signs); electronically mediated communication (intercom and telephone lights); and corporate authority (lapel pins of executives). However, amid these dominant signs of modernity, one also finds crimson reminders of life's more sensual pleasures: flowers and flowered hats (tokens of ephemeral beauty and the absent natural landscape); a decorated gift (offered in an absurdly decorous exchange); a jelly dessert (made unappetizingly brown by that ill-placed green light in the drugstore); a flattering glow (eliciting joy at the International Expo); and a red handled screw-driver (a telltale attribute of the elusive artisans working behind every scene). After the revolutionary events in the nightclub, with its devilishly malfunctioning red neon arrow, red is taken back for the people, being re-associated with common props of everyday life: cigarettes, daily news, morning coffee and goods for exchange in the market. In the closing scene, when the tour of Paris ends in a traffic-jammed round-about experienced as a cosmopoetic carousel ride, red helium-filled balloons rise amid a proliferation of colourful automobiles, cranes, concrete-mixing trucks, fuel stations, decorated curtain walls, civic monuments and children of every age.

With this selective distribution of colour over the duration of the film, Tati gradually reveals the festive potential latent in the generic city. Reactivating comedy's most archaic function of positive civic renewal, *Playtime* ends with a new beginning, allegorized as colourful vitality emerging from muted grey.

Surround sound: Polysemic languages of silence and gesture

Together with wide-screen formatting and Technicolor, Tati used the newest acoustic media: five-track stereophonic sound. All the same, *Playtime* is permeated by silence. Like the monochromatic set, silence establishes a neutral ground from which meaningful sounds emerge, such as bodily contact with the built environment (especially footsteps), and incongruous sounds having comically symbolic effect, like a rooster's crow at dawn in the midst of the city (Borden 2000; 2002). Tati and his technicians laboured for months creating post-production sound effects, many of which ironically foreground the background noise of a modern city: the clamour of traffic outside; the hum of fluorescent lights, together with buzzes and blips of mechanical equipment, within. As for dialogue, we hear only isolated snippets of speech amid largely unintelligible murmurs

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of conversation. As David Bellos puts it (in a rather McLuhanesque way), 'What we hear is not speech as such, but the sound of speech being made' (1999: 124). Nevertheless, *Playtime* is full of articulate discourse, since actors communicate constantly through body language. The film's relative silence allows these significant actions to resound.

With corporeal skills gained from his formative career as a mime performer, Tati directed *Playtime* as an expertly choreographed ballet. Tati even cast a professional ballet dancer to perform a perfect prosaic leap from a delivery truck during a split-second scene in the traffic-jammed roundabout (Bellos 1999: 279). Most of his actors, however, were non-professionals, since he preferred teaching ordinary people to mime themselves. In being meticulously crafted by Tati, every gesture, no matter how banal or brief, was made to speak with the eloquence of mime. This ancient dramatic medium underlies the gestures of *Playtime's* modern intermediaries, including those of the white-gloved cop directing traffic; the white-gloved guides directing tourists; a white-gloved clerk directing businessmen; and a white-collared receptionist directing phone calls. Mime is also active in the suggestive transformation of social movements. Whereas, at the start of the film, employees travel like vectors, conforming to orthogonal architecture, toward the end, individuals stagger, swagger and stroll, moved more by their own desires and in complex harmony with dynamic social and metaphysical situations. Tati frequently commented on *Playtime's* intentional transformation of human movement: from straight lines and right angles, to going round in circles (Rosenbaum 1973). Broadly speaking, as adherence to the imposed modern grid loosens, self-expression, collective festivity, regenerative rhythms and cosmic cycles thrive.

On a more detailed level, these movements of social life reveal the important mediating role of embodied routines and habits of inhabitation. Throughout the film, non-verbal cultural practices are satirized and celebrated, but there are two scenes in which such practices become the riveting focus of attention. One occurs when Hulot encounters an old friend across the street. Although Hulot sees the man, he does not recognize him. Even when the friend calls out, 'The army, remember?' Hulot draws a blank. It is only after the friend reenacts a bit of a military drill that Hulot recalls their bond. This embodied routine remains for Hulot the catalyst of their friendship, the trigger for memory, and the target of attention. Another early scene sets two contrasting manners of waiting in vivid relief. As Hulot waits for Gifford in a vacuous glass-walled room, he roams around with casual inspection: walking cautiously over the tractionless floor; studying the sparse progressive furniture; watching with contentment life in the city, all the while being watched by straight-faced executives whose menacing portraits dominate the space. Then, while Hulot is engrossed with his synthetic seat cushion, an American businessman is escorted into the room. Self-absorbed and comfortably alien to his situation, this man accepts at once the seat he is directed to. Taking no interest in the typical waiting situation, the busy man commences a cacophony of habitual gestures, performed with the accompaniment of various gadgets pulled from his pockets and zippered case. He consults his wristwatch, clips a fingernail, stretches his neck, clears

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Figure 7: Two situations of waiting: with an American businessman (left); with Hulot (right). *Playtime* (1967), © Public Media Home Vision.

Figure 8: Mediating thresholds at the International Expo (left), and the Drugstore (right). *Playtime* (1967), © Public Media Home Vision.

his nose, smacks his lips, retrieves a form, signs his name, ingests a mint, and inhales antihistamine, all the while brushing and adjusting his pristine attire. His movements are executed with mechanical precision and punctuated with percussive taps, sniffs, pops and zips. While this man noisily fidgets, Hulot (our tacit guide) watches in reflective silence, inviting audiences, likewise, to observe the situated practices of everyday life with comparable interpretive intensity.

More as a witness than a judge, Hulot testifies in profound silence to the 'speechless speaking' embodied in patterns of life pulsing in and around the waiting room. Such non-verbal scenes of *Playtime* should not be reduced to either Tati's suppression of language or Hulut's loss for words. Rather, to paraphrase philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer, there is more to say about such life events than speech will allow (Kidder 2013: 27).

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In each instance of multi-mediation described above, Tati made use of the most advanced cinematic media while involving strategies learned through prior mediums and more basic modes of interpretive engagement – a common strategy in media arts, much discussed by McLuhan (1964: 193). In other words, Tati was driven by a hybrid enthusiasm: both for new media, and for what these media reactivate and reveal about human practices and situations. Somewhat like Hulot, and other Hulot-like intermediaries, *Playtime's* novel media (70mm film, Technicolor and surround sound) impart their influence while withdrawing from prominence, providing novel cinematic experiences that simultaneously renew manifold engagement with everyday reality.

Mediating thresholds: Where every one becomes involved

In conjunction with human intermediaries and artistic media, *Playtime* features architecture itself as an active mediator. Most conspicuously, the ubiquitous glass surfaces of *Playtime* perform in media-reflexive ways, presenting fleeting images of an elusive Paris to characters in the film, much as the cinematic screen presents flickering images of city life to spectators. Yet, media reflexivity is not the only message. Along with acting like a cinematic (or digital) screen, the glass surfaces of *Playtime* also directly invite and enable human exchange by performing socially mediating roles in the midst of use. Those grand Parisian monuments appear on moving glass doors not arbitrarily, but at specific transitional moments in the narrative, just when these doors are being used for common activities: going in and coming out; receiving and discharging guests; and serving as a shared site of face-to-face exchange. Moreover, on these ordinary occasions, the reflected cultural landmarks conjure a specific variety of correspondences, comically and critically expanding on prosaic activities underway. The Eiffel Tower, an elegant civic expression of nineteenth-century technology, is glimpsed as Barbara enters an International Exposition promoting trivial twentieth-century gadgetry. The Arc de Triomphe, a monument to Napoleon's foreign exploits, appears as a hotel concierge opens the door for arriving sightseers, welcoming the onslaught of neo-colonial tourism. Having conquered the sites, these weary tourists (commodified *spolia* in hand) march through the triumphant archway on their way to king-size beds. A moment later, the Obelisk at Place de la Concorde appears in the same hotel windows as a different group of tourists depart for the nightclub. This obelisk, a 'gift' from Egypt erected at a site linked to the violent aftermath of the French Revolution, would seem to point not only to its own dynastic origins and the fall of the French monarchy, but also to future turmoil at the exotic Royal Garden. Finally, the Basilica de Sacré-Coeur in Montmartre, a long-thriving site of sacred and artistic confluence, is reflected in the doorway of the Drug Store as a deliveryman engages in friendly chatter with a street-sweeper during their morning routines.

Beyond providing postcard-like reflections of celebrated monuments at salient moments, these dynamically mediated thresholds spark reflection on society's

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technological, political and cultural practices. By shifting attention – to and fro – between the mundane routines of Tativille and the monumental works of Paris, these thresholds fuse present and past, typical and exemplary, ephemeral and permanent. Performing what Gadamer called 'twofold mediation', each encounter gathers focused attention, while redirecting attention 'to the greater whole of the life context which it accompanies' (1993 [1975]: 158). Insightful reflections emerge both in the midst of use, being 'elicited from the flux of manifold reality' (Gadamer 1986: 129), and in the midst of comparative thought, arising from dialogical and reciprocal awareness. These architectural thresholds of *Playtime*, thus, open up space and time for serious hermeneutic 'play'. This liberating yet grounded form of interpretive interplay is a mediating activity crucial to understanding our complex participation in civic life.

Whereas glass surfaces on some occasions readily facilitate social exchange, others in the film problematize and hinder human interaction: as when a stranger on the street seeks the favor of a doorman to light his cigarette, but is obstructed by intervening glass; or when Hulot strives to meet Gifford face-to-face, but is misled by reflections. Such disruptions turn modern architecture's promise of transparency and fluid interconnectivity into instances of discontinuity and disorientation. But these scenes are equally important for reinforcing the importance of architectural thresholds as interactive sites where the medium of social exchange becomes accessible for interpretation. Throughout *Playtime*, the experience of the city becomes most intensely mediated at thresholds: at windows, doorways, vestibules, landings, security checkpoints, commercial checkout counters; and other middle spaces between buildings, between office partitions, between insides and outsides, even between cars. Hulot's entrance into the film from the socially entangled back door of a public bus, and his farewell gift exchange with Barbara (via a Hulot-like intermediary) at the front door

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Figure 9: Hulot's socially-entangled entry (left), and exit (right) from the film. *Playtime* (1967), © Public Media Home Vision.

of a departing tour bus, establishes mediating thresholds as a primary paradigm of the film's double plot. Its tragicomic climax happens at the main entrance to the nightclub. While disagreeing over whether to stay or leave, Hulot (who wishes to go) and his old army friend (turned nightclub doorman) inadvertently shatter the glass door. However, although the glass pane is gone, the socially mediating threshold remains active, being embodied in the decorous gestures of Hulot, the miming doorman and the people themselves. Bearing these examples in mind, we may conclude as follows: if we are to consider *Playtime's* doors and windows as 'media' reflexive, and the film in general as contributing to our understanding of mediated cities, then we must include the social entanglements and interpretive exchanges enacted across these thresholds as fundamental modes of mediation.

Conclusion: Enabling interplay

When asked about his critical stance toward modern architecture, Tati typically shifted attention to his more important underlying motive. In a 1981 interview, he offered this telling response, '*Je ne suis pas architecte, je suis là pour defender les locataires* [I am not an architect, I am here to defend the inhabitants]' (Sichère 1985: 86). Tati frequently qualified his role as 'defending' the people (Gilliatt 1973: 39), acting as an 'arbiter' or 'attorney of the human being' (Tati 1977: 03:20-30). This chapter has similarly attempted to defend the mediating agencies of interpretive individuals and social situations, together with advocating for a richly layered approach to artistic media grounded in ethical concerns. This is not to say that media is the only message, nor that the kinds of basic and performative media valued here preclude or invalidate digital media. Rather, the argument is that by loosening our fixation on mediating gadgets, we can more fully engage the subtle but enabling interplay of underlying social, situational and interpretive agencies that make us, and our cities, human. In this synthetic way we might – with an active imagination and proper sense of humour – sustain those most efficacious modes of mediation that can help us construct viable cities, pursue mutual understanding, and sustain our shared capacity for delight.

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1. Kahn (1992); Penz (1997); Ockman (2000); Borden (2000; 2002); Hilliker (2002); and Cairns (2013).
2. Tati retold this anecdote about modeling the Hulot character on an architect in several interviews, including a public discussion with Albert Johnson following the American premier of *Playtime* at the 1972 San Francisco International Film Festival. This interview is included on the Criterion Collection 2006 DVD Edition of *Playtime*.
3. Tati's architect collaborators included Raymond Laroche, who designed the elegant street lamps at Orly Airport, which Tati featured in the opening and closing scenes of *Playtime* (Ede & Goudet 2002: 38); Eugène Roman, who designed and built Tativille; and Jacques Lagrange, who produced numerous design models, sketches and collages for each of Tati's films (Bellos 1999: 206-07, 265).
4. *L'infra-ordinaire* is a neologism penned by George Perec in 'Approaches de quoi', first published in *Cause Commune* (February, 1973), republished in *Species of Spaces* (1999: 209-10). It is unlikely that Tati read Perec, but Perec did watch the films of Tati (Bellos 1993: 168).

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